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SYNOPSIS ON

Female Mind at Work in English Drama

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Female Mind at Work in English Drama

Background:

The moment we think about great playwrights, who have achieved spectacular success in the history of English theatre, the names that come to our mind are William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Ibsen, etc. Similarly, when we think of their American counterparts, dramatists who have carved their niche in this genre, names like Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, etc. spontaneously come to our mind.

On the international scene playwrights like Anton Chekhov, Moliere and Bernold Brecht have made an indelible mark in the history of international theatre as playwrights. However, when we think about women who have left their mark in this genre we really have to think hard. Fewer women have tried their hand at playwriting. When one goes through the endless list of male dramatists, one wonders where the female playwrights are. Is drama a male bastion? Is it the sole prerogative of men? Or is it that women lack the artistic talent or skills that drama demands.

It is true that in the long range of literature, women have been less successful with plays than other literary forms. There have been prolific women poets like Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Browning, women writers like Jane Austen, The Bronte sisters, Virginia Woolf, etc but there is a dearth of women playwrights. Why such glaring difference and why such unequal circumstances should persist is a topic about which many female playwrights have long opined. My study proposes to find out why very few women have experimented with this genre.

Rationale and Significance of Study:

When we analize the history of theatre in England, we realize that women playwrights played an important role in the theatrical history of eighteen- century England and Restoration period. Before this period all theatrical activity was banned by the Puritans for religious and ideological reasons .With the restoration of monarchy in 1660 the theatres opened again. Drama as a form thrived under the

reign and patronage of Charles II. Female playwrights first gained access to the English theatre as an actress, which is after Restoration

Aphra Behn had seventeen plays written in her life time. Many others followed in her footsteps. Female dramatists like Susanna Centlivre (1669-1773), Mary Pix ((1666-1709), Hannay Cowley (1743 – 1809) etc. looked upon her as their role model.
The women playwrights who wrote between the Restoration and the end of the 18th century produced a large body of admirable work. It was a period when women playwrights were successful in both writing and producing plays. Not only did they receive critical acclaim for their plays but they were also commercially successful. They wove diverse subjects like prison reforms, colonialism and a woman's role in a marriage into their comedic plots. And these women were able to carve their niche in a male dominated society which had a firm belief that women cannot write. The underlying message being, despite being at the top of their field these women playwrights haven't got the status due to them. Something that showers accolades on Congreve but something that leaves out Susana Centlivre who was at par with Congreve regarding the number of plays she had produced. The point I am trying to make is, women did produce a number of plays during this time but their work has become obscure.

On the contrary, due to moral confinements on women and other social factors, very few women playwrights appeared on the horizon of stage at the turn of the nineteenth century.
The inter-war period suddenly saw many women playwrights breaking into the supposedly male dominion. Playwrights like Clemence Dane, Dodie Smith, G.B Stern, etc made their presence felt in theatre.
Many significant events marked the history of Britain after the Second World War. Queen Elizabeth was coronated in 1953 which brought about social, political stability in Britain. In drama, on the other hand, it was the decade of the angry young men and John Osborn was a pioneering figure in this area. This era produced playwrights like Ann Jellicoe who experimented with form and Shelagh Delaney who is remembered for her play *A Taste of Honey.*
A significant change took place in the history of theatre: the abolition of censorship in 1968. Due to this there was no restriction on the theme of the play, plays could be

produced anywhere and had no restriction of language. In this period Michelene Wandor and Caryl Churchill were important figures.

The point I am trying to make is, a large body of estimable plays have been written by British women playwrights. However, their work has been forgotten or slighted and it is a fact worth recalling. My study proposes to address and explore the works of the British female playwrights who have made a remarkable and significant contribution to theatrical history but whose works have gone into oblivion.

When we analize American theatrical history, it dawns on us that initially American theatre drew on the traditions of Britain. American playwrights adhered to the norms set by their British counterparts as far as plays were concerned. Later on they started crafting plays that expressed distinct American sensibilities, their unique problems and different points of view.

Women playwrights created characters that epitomized the American woman. Mercy Otis Warren was the first American woman who wrote comedies. The next towering figure was Susan Glaspell (1876-1958) who started her literary career by writing novels. After marriage she turned to play writing and her plays are popular in the women studies circuit. Rachel Crothers (1878-1958) was a prolific playwright and was remembered for her dramaturgy. We also have African American playwrights like Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), Ntozake Shange (born in 1948) who made their presence felt on the theatrical scene.

These American women playwrights have contributed enormously to the evolution of a distinct American theatre, in terms of form, content etc. But they have been represented unfairly in the history of American theatre and have been overshadowed by their male counterparts like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams etc. Moreover, these women playwrights are not as recognized as their male counterparts. There could be two possibilities for this disparity.

- Something within the female mind -Compatibility of the female psyche with drama as a form
- Something outside the female mind-External or sociological factors affecting the writing of plays.

The research proposes to find out which one of these is more pertinent. Moreover, the research will try to document the contribution of these female playwrights and would view their work in a new light.

Research done in this area: In the second wave of feminism attempts were made to increase the number of female authors available to readers. Critics have also endeavored to analyze the work done by females in this area. However, it has not pinpointed as to why there is a dearth of female playwrights vis-à-vis its male counterparts. Moreover, the compatibility of the woman psyche with drama as a form has not been analyzed so far. A lot of ink has been spent in depicting the non-conducive social conditions in which women have been writing plays, but the bias has not been categorically established so far.

Aims and objectives:

- To examine if there is a gender bias in canonization of dramatists
- To explore the socio-psychological factors that might affect the female playwrights
- To unravel the different facets of female imagination which influence their work.
- To look into the artistic demands made by drama as a genre on the playwrights
- It is a fact that women have achieved a lot of fame as novelists and poets but the same popularity is not mirrored in drama. What could be the rationale behind this? The demands made by novel are different from that made by a play. Both are similar as far as plot, theme and characters are concerned, but the fundamental difference is that a play has to be acted on stage. It should have a plot that is performable. Furthermore, drama is more versatile than a novel as it is an audiovisual medium. The novels allow us the freedom to create and imagine the world that the writer is describing in our own unique way, while the play shows us the world as the director sees it, and as the actors portray it in all its concreteness without leaving us the scope to use our own imagination. Moreover, a novel can be loosely written but a play

demands a tight structure as it is time bound. Poetry also draws on our imagination. This is one characteristic that it shares with novels, but it is compressed unlike a novel. It has the unique power to communicate effectively in few words the same message that a novel would need many pages to send across. When it comes to brevity in poetry women excel at it. Then, what happens in a play?

- The research proposes to study the different facets of female imagination which might be better at novel writing than the writing of plays .It will examine the imaginative and creative skills that influence the work of women and the artistic talents and skills that are required to write a play; in other words, to study the demands that drama makes but the female imagination has not been able to satisfy.
- To study selected female playwrights and their female imagination at work.
- To investigate if one of the reasons for their non recognition is due to the themes that they have handled.

Scope and limitations:

1) The study proposes to address and examine **selected** works of some British and American playwrights, especially women writing in the modern era. It will try to search if a distinct female voice emerges from these works.

Women playwrights have been denounced for their obsession with domesticity. The study will examine if this proposition holds truth and will examine the themes that women have handled in their plays. It will also find out if a woman's point of view emanates through her works.

It will try to look at the works of female playwrights from different angles like social, historical, psychological etc.

2) The research will also examine the artistic skills that are required to write a play and whether women are better at one literary form than the other.

This study would include the psychology of creation with the dramatic form and its compatibility with the women psyche.

There are many women who have tried their hand at playwriting all over the world, but it is not possible to include all of them. My research will deal with selected works of English and American playwrights.

Hypotheses: The study is two directional and so two hypotheses are needed

- The research will try to investigate whether gender bias and other external circumstances play a pivotal role in the public response to the plays of female playwrights
- The intrinsic characteristics of plays by female playwrights are themselves responsible for the public response to female playwrights.

Methodology and methods

Two different hypotheses require two different methods of data collection and analysis

- Quantitative: Comparison of male and female playwrights in terms of the plays staged, awards received and recognition garnered.
- Qualitative: A study of selected plays by female playwrights

Methods of data collection:

- Library and online research: Part of the research will be carried out by referring to books, journals, encyclopedias, etc both on the net and from the library.
- Face-to-face interviews: This will involve conducting of personal interviews of men and women playwrights, directors, producers, poets and novelists if required at any stage of research.
- Survey done through questionnaire: Questionnaires will be sent to men and women poets, novelists, playwrights who are based abroad if required at any juncture of research.

Tentative chapterization:

Introduction: This chapter will provide a background to the topic. It will try to place women playwrights in the theatrical history of England and America. It will also do a review of literature.

- Female mind and play writing: This will discuss the artistic talents that are required for writing a play and will examine female playwrights in this light. It will try to examine the demands of drama and the compatibility of the female psyche with it.

- Analysis of selected works of female playwrights: In this chapter selected plays of women will be aesthetically looked at. It will also explore the thematic concerns of the play. Women playwrights have been denounced as it is believed that their plays revolve around domesticity and there is not much substance in their plots.

- Data Analysis: It will analize the data and will document the findings.

Uniqueness: I think the uniqueness of this research lies in the fact that it will endeavor to pin point as to why there is a dearth of female playwrights. It will try to offer fresh and new insights into the plays written by women. The research will also shed light on the merits and limitations of females as playwrights. It will also examine the held notion about the executive functions of playwrights – playwrights require masculine qualities of mind and personality. Moreover, it will investigate whether it is another stereotype imposed on women. The researcher is confident that findings of the research will not only help students of literature but also women playwrights, producers, everybody associated with theatre in some way or the other as it will provide comprehensive discussion about the socio-psycho factors that affect writing of plays.

Tentative Conclusion: There is a dearth of female playwrights as there is gender bias in canonization of dramatists or drama as a genre makes certain artistic demands which the female playwrights are not able to satisfy or both the conditions are true.

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